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ABSTRACT

The study examines the acquisition of gender constancy in children as it relates to cultural, socioenvironmental, or individual differences. Gender constancy refers to the stages from simple identification of biological sex of self and others, to the understanding that one's sex is stable over time, and to comprehension of one's sex as consistent across situations. The sample consisted of 48 children between the ages of three and nine from Belize, Kenya, Nepal, and Samoa. The children were observed and interviewed by native observers who were trained by the experimenters. A sixteen-item test included questions such as: Are you a girl or a boy? Were you ever a little boy or girl? Could you ever be a boy/girl? When you grow up will you be a mommy or daddy? If you (insert sex task appropriate to the culture) would you be a girl or boy? Results indicate that the great majority of children in these cultures progress through the same stages, although in general at later ages, as do children in the United States. The conclusion is that possibly a universality exists in the orderly progression from the acquisition of simple identity through the acquisition of consistency in children's ability to understand sex gender constancy. (Author/KC)

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Among Children in Four Cultures

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The Development of Sex-Gender Constancy
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Abstract

Do children in non-Western societies acquire the elements of sex-gender constancy in the same sequence and at the same ages as do children in the U.S.?

The development of gender constancy, an example of Piagetian qualitative constancy, is posited to progress from simple identification of biological sex of self and others, to the understanding that one's biological sex is stable over time, and, finally, to comprehension of one's sex as consistent across situations. According to several studies, children in the U.S. typically progress through these stages between the ages of about 3 and 4-1/2 years.

In a study of 48 children between the ages of 3 and 9 years from Belize, Kenya, Nepal, and Samoa, results indicate that the great majority of children in these cultures progress through the same stages although, in general, at later ages.

The present study examines the regularities and slight variations in the acquisition of gender constancy as these might relate to cultural, socio-environmental or individual differences among the subjects.

The Development of Sex-Gender Constancy
Among Children in Four Cultures¹

Ruth H. Munroe

and

Robert L. Munroe

An understanding of sex-gender constancy derives from the broader Piagetian concept of qualitative invariance. According to Piaget, the acquisition of qualitative invariance involves the dissociation of the permanent and the variable qualities of an object or class of objects or, in other words, an understanding of the attributes of an object sufficiently thorough to identify that object (or class of objects) in varying states, guises, and places. This acquisition of object identity is said to precede the acquisition of quantitative constancy (conservation) which involves the further steps of recognition of transformations (in dimensions, for example) and knowledge of the reversibility of operations. Qualitative constancy, or identity, normally appears in the preoperational period among children in the United States (DeVries, 1969) but would, of course, continue to evidence itself after conservation, involving quantitative thought, has been acquired.

Sex gender is one common personal attribute capitalized upon in all societies as a criterion for qualitative sorting (Linton, 1945). In many societies gender labeling is critical to the everyday functioning of all individuals (with the exception of infants) because social rules are differentially applicable to males and females. Sex-gender constancy, or the ability invariantly to sort one's self and others into one of the two sex

genders, becomes one of the cornerstone concepts in the child's ability to apply the rules of the society to him/ or herself and to others. Without this understanding, a child may behave in a fashion deemed inappropriate or misjudge the meaning of behavior exhibited by others.

An approach to gender constancy in Western culture has been presented by Slaby and Frey (1975), who base their theoretical reasoning on Kohlberg and on previous work by DeVries (1969, 1974). They identified four developmental levels: (1) a zero-point, or absence-of-constancy stage; (2) a stage labeled "gender identity," in which the child understands that "he or she and every other individual are either male or female"; (3) a stage labeled "gender stability," in which the child understands that "boys invariably become men and girls become women"; and (4) a stage labeled "gender consistency," in which the child understands that "the human attribute of being either male or female will not change with changing situations and personal motivations" (Slaby & Frey, 1975:850). Slaby and Frey found a strongly reproducible Guttman scale with respect to these stages. Our research was organized around the question of the cross-cultural generality of the Slaby and Frey gender constancy findings.

The present study, part of a larger inquiry, investigates whether the sequencing of sex-gender learning is affected by cultural context. The four cultures studied were selected to maximize potential differences in two societal variables that seem particularly important in children's acquisition of sex roles (see, e.g., Ember, 1973; Whiting & Whiting, 1975): the family organization or degree of social intimacy between husband and wife (which largely determines the degree of availability of adults of both sexes in children's settings), and the degree to which division of adult subsistence labor is determined by sex (an index of the extensiveness

and rigidity of societal sex-role stereotyping). A simple dichotomy of each of these variables was employed to select cultures that would be most diverse.² One culture--the Newars of Nepal--has, relatively speaking, both highly available adults of both sexes in the child's world and a strong division of labor by sex. The Garifuna of Belize, by contrast, have neither high social availability of adults of both sexes nor a high degree of sex-typed labor. The other two societies combine these characteristics in the other two possible ways, with the Logoli of Kenya having low availability of adults of both sexes and highly structured sex division of labor, and the Samoans (American Samoa, Pacific) having high availability of adults of both sexes and less clear-cut division of labor by sex.

If environmental events are central to sex-role learning, the children in the four cultures, with such relatively diverse opportunities for learning, might be expected to gain the concept of sex-gender constancy in different sequences and at markedly different rates. If the progress of cognitive growth is inevitable, under normal environmental conditions, the children from all four cultures should evidence similar sequences of development at approximately similar ages.

Method

Children in all cultures were selected from those available in the villages or settlement areas pre-selected for the study. In most cases, sample selection was based on closest age match between boys and girls but both number of children per household (maximum = 3) and geographical location dictated several choices. Children in all cultures were observed over a period of approximately two months by native observers trained by the experimenters. The interviewing/testing of all 5 to 9 year old children was conducted in a standard setting within each culture. Three-year-old

children were tested in or near their own homes under conditions which included as much privacy as possible. Each child was tested in her/his native language or in the language the two native testers (one male, one female--about 20 years of age) deemed most understandable for a particular task. The sex-gender constancy questions were always asked by the female tester. These questions were included in a battery of tests and questions which took from approximately 30 to 90 minutes for administration to each child.

Sample

Forty-eight children, six boys and six girls at each of four age levels (3, 5, 7, and 9), were studied in each society. Variable N's, for the sex-gender-constancy questions, result from children failing to respond at all or failing to respond with adequate comprehension to any or all of the particular set of questions.

Belize. Sample children from Belize were all identified, ethnically, as Garifuna (formerly called Black Carib) and resided in the coastal town of Punta Gorda (population approximately 1600 Garifuna and 900 non-Garifuna) at the southern end of this British protectorate in Central America. Subsistence activities for the Garifuna in the village include agriculture and fishing. Many Garifuna men are employed elsewhere. Of those in town, several fathers have local government positions and others are employed by local merchants. Family patterns are largely maternally oriented, with mother-child households or mother-her kin-child households predominating. The ideal pattern is nuclearity but only about 30% of the sample children resided in classical nuclear households, and only about half the sample lived in homes with adult males present.

Kenya. Sample children from Kenya were members of the Logoli people who are one sub-set of the Luhya. The children resided in an agricultural area comprised of adjacent-homesteads with no nucleated village pattern. Maragoli, the location in which the Logoli reside, is in western Kenya in the highland area about 15 miles north of Lake Victoria. Subsistence activities include agriculture and animal husbandry; about half of the Logoli fathers of sample children were engaged in wage labor either nearby (about 40% of those employed) or in locations distant enough that they visited home relatively infrequently. The traditional pattern of localized, patrilineally extended homesteads is changing, with independent households rapidly becoming more common. Additionally, adult daughters are beginning to bear children prior to marriage and without leaving the natal home. Nonetheless, about 60% of the sample homes were linked with contiguous households through kin ties in the parental (i.e., through father's brother) or grandparental generation.

Nepal. Sample children from Nepal were all identified as Newars (almost entirely of the Jyapu caste, with several families of the Nay and Putuwar castes) and resided in Bosigaon (population approximately 850) which is a village located toward the northwest edge of the Kathmandu valley (approximately 5 miles from the capital city of Kathmandu). The major subsistence activity for the Newars in Bosigaon is agriculture, with minor animal husbandry; about half of the Newar fathers were employed in Kathmandu, primarily as carpenters, and most returned home daily. The father was present on a regular basis in almost all sample homes. More than half the sample children resided in independent households, while the remainder were part of larger patrilineal groupings.

Samoa. Sample children from Samoa were primarily residents of the village of Ta'u (population approximately 600) on the western side of

Ta'u Island in American Samoa. Several sample children were residents of Faleasao, a village of approximately 150 people located about a half-mile north of Ta'u village. The major subsistence activity on Ta'u Island is agriculture with some fishing and animal husbandry. The great majority of resident males are employed, primarily in government positions or programs. Postmarital residence is ambilocal, and the traditional pattern of extended households continues to be observed, with three-fourths of the sample children residing in some form of an extended family. In almost all households in the sample, either the father or the matai--the titled male in charge of the household--was resident in the home.

Gender Constancy Test

The 16 items used in all cultures for the gender constancy test are almost identical to those developed by Slaby and Frey (1975). Several items were omitted. For items 13 and 14, culture-appropriate work tasks were substituted for a game item. These tasks were chosen as typically performed by one sex and not by the other, both in childhood and in adulthood. The tasks used in questions 13 and 14 were: Belize--fishing, washing clothes; Kenya--herding, carrying water on your head; Nepal--milking cows, washing clothes; Samoa--planting taro, washing clothes.

Questions were submitted to translation and back-translation in Kenya and Nepal. In Belize, English was interspersed with Carib or Creole (languages) and in Samoa, English was interspersed with Samoan as needed for each child. The questions, and re-questions used were:

1. (showing child a male doll) Is this a girl doll or a boy doll?
2. (showing child a male doll) Is this a _____ doll? (E inserts opposite sex of what named in item 1.)
3. (showing child a female doll) Is this a girl doll or a boy doll?

4. (showing child a female doll) Is this a _____ doll? (E inserts opposite sex of that named in item 3.)
5. Are you a girl or a boy?
6. Are you a _____? (E inserts opposite sex of that named in item 5.)
7. When you were a little baby, were you a little girl or a little boy?
8. Were you ever a little _____? (E inserts opposite sex of that named in item 7.)
9. When you grow up, will you be a mommy or a daddy?
10. Could you ever be a _____? (E inserts opposite sex of that named in item 9.)
11. If you wore (opposite sex of child, i.e., "boys'" or "girls'") clothes, would you be a girl or a boy?
12. If you wore (opposite sex of child, i.e., "boys'" or "girls'") clothes, would you be a _____? (E inserts opposite sex of that named in item 11.)
13. If you _____ (E inserts opposite sex task appropriate to the culture), would you be a girl or a boy? (e.g., in Belize, for a boy, E would ask "If you washed clothes, would you be a girl or a boy?")
14. If you _____ (E inserts opposite sex task appropriate to the culture), would you be a _____? (E inserts opposite sex of that named in item 13.)
15. Could you be a _____ (E inserts opposite sex of child) if you wanted to be?

Stages of gender constancy were determined by the same method as that developed by Slaby and Frey (1975). Demonstration of the acquisition of each level of constancy required that the child respond accurately to all questions in the set. Gender identity was comprised of items 1-6; gender stability was comprised of items 7-10; gender consistency was comprised of

items 11-15. A child who answered none of the sets of items correctly was identified as belonging to stage 1; a child who answered the set of gender identity items correctly, but no other sets of items correctly, was identified as belonging to stage 2; a child who answered the sets of gender identity and gender stability items correctly, but not the gender consistency items, was identified as belonging to stage 3; a child who answered all sets of items correctly was identified as belonging to stage 4.

Results

In Table 1, all children from all cultures are pooled by the stage of sex-gender constancy achieved. The table indicates a strong cross-cultural confirmation of the scalability of the set of items (with only 18 (about 10%) of the children failing to fit into one of the four stage-type patterns of responses).

Insert Table 1 about here.

The mean ages of children who achieve each stage progresses from stage 1 to stage 4, with girls having slightly lower ages than boys at all stage levels (n.s.).

The modal stage achieved by children across the cultures--stage 3--indicates the general difficulty experienced by children everywhere in understanding that activities and alterable attributes (clothing, in this case) do not merge with permanent attributes to form discriminative criteria. One quarter of the sample members, averaging just under eight years of age, had mastered this final concept as well.

Insert Tables 2-5 about here.

Tables 2 to 5 present results from each culture individually. The most markedly different results were obtained from the Kenyan children (Kenya vs. all others $\chi^2 = 11.93$, $p < .001$, Kenya vs. Nepal and Samoa $\chi^2 = 12.24$, $p < .001$, comparing stages 1, 2, and 3 vs. stage 4). The difference arises primarily from a lower proportion of Kenyan children (9%) who achieve stage 4. It is also the case that for the Belizean children, a relatively small proportion--20%--achieve Stage 4 whereas 35% of the Nepalese and 43% of the Samoan children reach Stage 4 (Belize vs. Nepal and Samoa $\chi^2 = 4.43$, $p < .05$, comparing stages 1, 2, and 3 vs. stage 4).

Discussion

The most striking aspect of the results is the fact that 90% of the children in the total 4-culture sample fell into one of the stage-type patterns of response.³ These results compare fairly well with the findings of Slaby and Frey that 98% of their American sample fit into one of the stage-type response patterns. The difference between the total sample and the American sample, with respect to the number of non-stage-type children, is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 3.18$, 1 d.f.). When one considers the measurement error almost inevitably introduced in working across cultures, it is probably safe to estimate that the proportion of children who actually belonged in a non-stage-type pattern was less than the 10% we found.

In the area of sex stereotyping, Williams and his colleagues, in this conference and elsewhere (e.g., 1979), report an accumulation of findings that indicate impressive cross-national similarities in the psychological traits which are differentially assigned to men and women. The present study, in adding replications in four cultures to Slaby and Frey's finding, suggests that strong cross-cultural generality also may ultimately be discovered in the conceptually related domain of sex-gender constancy. More

generally still, the findings support recent emphases on the presumptive universality of processes, outcomes, and relationships (Kagan, in press; Lonner, 1980; Rohner, 1975; Scribner & Cole, 1973) rather than on differences among cultures.

The age-progression associated with the stages reflects developmental changes. For the full 4-culture sample (Table 1), there is an advance in the mean age of acquisition of each higher level in the sequence. This result was also obtained with Slaby and Frey's American sample. If we look at the individual cultures (Tables 2-5), we see that the sequence holds up perfectly for the Belizean and Kenyan children, and that the relative ages are reversed from expectation only for Stages 1 and 2 in Nepal and Samoa. These exceptions, however, are based on data from a total of but nine children in each culture. Overall, the powerful association of age with degree of advancement accords well with Piagetian theory.

In comparing the age-stage data with the results from the American study, we see approximately a two to three year lag for the children in the four samples. This is a familiar finding in cognitive research, and brings up the issue, discussed by Dasen (1977) among others, as to whether the difference is real and significant, and, if so, whether it reflects a difference in competence or merely in performance. At present we shall not undertake discussion of these problems except to recognize that the familiarity of Western children with formal question-and-answer sessions ought to give them a distinct advantage here.

Although differences among the children from the four cultures are less strong than are similarities, some cultural features may help explain several of the differences that did arise. The mean age for Kenyan children is older at nearly every stage than that for the Belizean, Nepalese, and Samoan sample

members. Scribner (1976; cited in Dasen, 1977) points out that traditional peoples tend to use an "empiric" rather than "theoretic" approach to problems, which is to say that they reason logically from real-life knowledge and not from premises adopted as postulates. For such individuals, difficulties would be posed by some of the hypothetical questions included in the gender-constancy measure, e.g., "Could you ever be...?," "If you were...?" There is some evidence (Munroe & Munroe, 1975, pp. 80-82, 86-90) that this context-bound orientation is especially likely to develop where children are subject to strong socialization pressures for compliance, where they are expected always to obey with an unquestioning and accepting attitude. As it happens, most subsaharan African peoples, including the Logoli of our present study, strongly foster compliance in their socialization practices (Doob, 1965; Munroe, Munroe, & LeVine, 1972). If the effect of this training is as hypothesized, then the possibility is enhanced that the Logoli sample children would have been less able to deal effectively with many of the questions on the measure. Additionally, as Harkness and Super (1977) have pointed out, the compliance syndrome means that a good child does not speak or otherwise insinuate him/herself upon adults, and this entire "set" leaves the child at a severe disadvantage in any testing situation.

Both Kenyan and Belizean children achieve stage 4 in significantly smaller proportions than do children from Nepal and Samoa. Although the difficulty of dealing with "theoretic" test items may explain part of the variance for Kenyan children, another sociocultural variable--the availability of adults of both sexes in children's settings--also may have influenced the results. In both Kenya and Belize, adult males are less frequently available to children than they are in Nepal and Samoa. Within- and across-culture

analyses, using observed "degree of availability" scores for adults (not yet completed) may indicate that it is more difficult for children to develop complete gender constancy in environments where adult males are less frequently involved with children.

But to return to the main thrust of the findings. The replication of the stages, suggested by DeVries' (1969) original work and refined into four stages by Slaby and Frey (1975), raises the possibility of a universality in the orderly progression from the acquisition of simple identity through the acquisition of consistency in children's ability to understand sex-gender constancy. As DeVries (1969) notes, the investigation of qualitative identity constancy promises to yield continued insight into the child's quite different view of reality. And, in cross-cultural research, we can attempt to discover the ways in which particular sociocultural features may support or modify the progression of cognitive growth.

Footnotes

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2. The two sociocultural variables were roughly dichotomized on the basis of the ethnographic literature and the authors' previous work in several of the societies. The present larger study included the collection of systematic observational and interview data on each of these variables. Such data will result in more precise score values for each community, and for families within each community.

3. Furthermore, of the one-tenth exceptional cases, only 10% of those children fell into the most anomalous non-stage-type patterns, C and D, wherein a child would have understood the most advanced level, gender consistency, but would have misunderstood the most primitive level, gender identity.

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Table 1

Gender Constancy: Belize, Kenya, Nepal, Samoa

Type	Question Set		Gender Consis- tency	% of Children			Age in Months			Range
	Gender Identity	Gender Stability		Boys N=87	Girls N=91	Com- bined N=178	Mean: Boys	Mean: Girls	Mean: Com- bined	
Stage										
1	-	-	-	14	12	13	65	49	57	36-114
2	+	-	-	17	10	13	69	68	69	37-111
3	+	+	-	33	41	37	88	86	87	38-120
4	+	+	+	26	26	26	96	93	93	40-119
Non-Stage										
A	+	-	+	3	8	6	76	87	84	42-115
B	-	+	-	5	2	3	63	40	55	37-114
C	-	+	+	1	1	1	68	66	67	66-68
D	-	-	+	0	0	0	...	...	...	...

Table 2

Gender Constancy: Belize

Type	% of Children			Age in Months			Range
	Boys N=22	Girls N=23	Combined N=45	Mean: Boys	Mean: Girls	Mean: Combined	
Stage							
1	0	13	7	...	41	41	40-42
2	18	8	13	75	64	71	42-87
3	41	54	48	87	91	89	38-116
4	27	13	20	91	91	91	62-116
Non-Stage							
A	5	0	2	47	...	47	47
B	5	8	7	37	40	39	37-41
C	5	4	4	68	66	67	66-68
D	0	0	0	...	...	...	...

Table 3

Gender Constancy: Kenya

Type	% of Children			Age in Months			Range
	Boys N=22	Girls N=23	Combined N=45	Mean: Boys	Mean: Girls	Mean: Combined	
Stage							
1	32	26	29	64	47	56	36-114
2	23	9	16	78	92	82	62-111
3	27	39	33	95	90	92	60-119
4	5	13	9	118	96	101	94-118
Non-Stage							
A	5	13	9	88	100	97	95-111
B	9	0	4	87	...	87	60-114
C	0	0	0	...	...	...	...
D	0	0	0	...	...	...	...

Table 4

Gender Constancy: Nepal

Type	% of Children			Age in Months			Range
	Boys N=20	Girls N=20	Combined N=40	Mean: Boys	Mean: Girls	Mean: Combined	
Stage							
1	10	10	10	87	65	76	45-113
2	10	15	13	65	76	72	46-93
3	45	25	35	90	76	85	41-120
4	30	40	35	92	99	96	48-119
Non-Stage							
A	0	10	10	...	78	78	42-115
B	5	0	5	42	...	42	42
C	0	0	0	...	...	...	...
D	0	0	0	...	...	...	...

Table 5
Gender Constancy: Samoa

Type	% of Children			Age in Months			Range
	Boys N=23	Girls N=24	Combined N=47	Mean: Boys	Mean: Girls	Mean: Combined	
Stage							
1	13	0	6	55	...	55	43-73
2	17	8	13	54	39	49	37-73
3	22	42	32	81	81	81	36-118
4	43	42	43	99	82	90	40-118
Non-Stage							
A	4	9	6	94	74	81	64-94
B	0	0	0	...	...	...	...
C	0	0	0	...	...	...	...
D	0	0	0	...	...	...	...